Australian National University
Department of Pacific Affairs

In brief
2025/29

Peacebuilding to Prevent Violence in Papua New Guinea

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DOI: 10.25911/STGB-0S48
31 October 2025

This paper was originally presented to a panel 'Dialogues for peace: Is there a need for a national peace strategy?' at the 2025 PNG Update conference held at the University of Papua New Guinea, 21–22 August 2025.

While the causes of some conflicts in Papua New Guinea (PNG) are common to other countries, many are shaped by its unique sociocultural and development context. Conflicts range from interpersonal to intergroup violence and civil wars waged with high powered weapons, to conflict associated with climate change refugees and sorcery accusation-related violence (SARV). These conflicts call for active and effective solutions to ensure people and communities are guaranteed peace and freedom. Community-initiated peacebuilding in different parts of PNG has met with varying levels of success and differing challenges. These peace initiatives have demonstrated the resilient spirit of local people who are united by a common resolve that violence should never be part of a peaceful and progressive community.

After a decade of civil war in Bougainville, grassroots peacebuilding efforts demonstrated the collective abilities of the people to reharness kin and social relationships, valuing family, clan and tribe as the fabric of Melanesian society (Boege and Garasu 2011). During the civil war and related lawlessness, Bougainvilleans' abilities to step up efforts to care for one another, with the support of the churches and international development partners, allowed them to survive. Peacebuilding in complex conflicts should be aimed at addressing the nexus of physical and emotional harms as well as addressing sociocultural and economic structural inequalities.

For example, in the Yuri tribe of Simbu Province (Witne 2015) as well as Bougainville, people at the grassroots level converted ancient forms of identity, kin and social relationships based on *bormai suara* 'one blood' into innovative and sustainable social capital for peacebuilding. Cultural symbols of peace, such as a handshake, offering an olive leaf, the Christian principles of loving one another, and the rule of law, were seamlessly woven into the cultural symbol of rubbing pig's blood into cordyline stems and planting them in village squares to remind current and future generations of a commitment to unbreakable peace.

Peacebuilding efforts in PNG have always been confronted with old beliefs and practices coexisting in new circumstances with contemporary societies. Fear of sorcery and SARV erodes social cohesion and creates insecurity. Many insecure young men in PNG resort to violent lifestyles. One of the reasons for the civil war in Bougainville was the unequal distribution of the benefits from the Panguna Copper Mine. Such an unequal distribution of wealth led to an increasingly marginalised and disenfranchised youth, who saw the civil war as an opportunity to pick up arms and fight those believed to be stealing their wealth and birthright. However, they did not realise that they were killing and destroying their own people and environment. The grassroots peacebuilding movement that subsequently emerged was aimed at making amends and constructing sustainable peacebuilding in the region.

It was evident among the Yuri people in Simbu Province that decades of tribal and inter-clan wars disrupted basic services such as health and educational opportunities, and increased illiteracy, alcohol and drug abuse, which led to disrespecting elders in the community. Yuri experience prior to peacebuilding resonated with the violent attitudes of many unemployed young men in Bougainville, who took up firearms and killed their own people in the beginning of the civil war. These youths were further exploited by educated people for political and personal gain, and enticed with beer and guns to kill their own people and destroy their communities.

Learning from other peace initiatives

In the Yuri tribe, peacebuilding emphasises the abilities of the people to unite and reflect on destructive social habits. It explores different ways of internalising and integrating local knowledge and social systems to address the generational animosity of inter-clan wars and SARV. Peacebuilding serves as a catalyst to recognise and draw on cultural strengths, such as kinship and blood relationships strongly anchored in sharing, caring and helping other people in difficult times, and address cultural weaknesses, such as disagreements and conflicts, that undermine and disrupt relationships of tribal groups.

My own story of growing up in tribal war–torn villages among the Bari and Yuri tribes and my desire for peace and change (Witne 2015) resonate with the stories of Kini, Lari and other women who united to build Kup Women for Peace (KWP) in 1999. Based in Simbu Province, KWP was established to address tribal wars, gender-based violence and SARV. This was

the first time women had mobilised in Simbu Province to intervene and make peace in male-dominated wars. They used cultural symbols of tears, mud, joining hands and walking into the battlefields — a strategy which has proven effective over many years (Garap 2004; Hinton et al. 2008, 2013). KWP did not just make peace for the warring tribes but expanded to identify and address structural inequalities and the causes of gender-based violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and promote free and fair elections. KWP strongly advocates for human rights and social justice and inspires individuals and groups to take action and address problems in the community.

The Nauro tribe of Simbu Province, comprised of many clans, had been divided in inter-clan wars. The mountain where all the clans claimed shared heritage, called Gor, became a no-man's land as a result of these years of inter-clan wars. A sense of belonging to a common place, such as Gor, and shared remorse for destruction of properties and loss of lives, inspired a tribal consciousness for unity and peace among the Nauro people in 2006 (Bal 2015). A Polish Catholic priest and orthopaedic surgeon, Dr Jan Jaworski, was initiated into the Nauro tribe, and he was instrumental in uniting people and advocating for peace. Since 2006, there have been no reports of inter-clan or tribal wars in the Nauro tribe.

The benefits of peacebuilding in Bougainville and various parts of Simbu Province inspired conversations among the Yuri people in 2012. A few educated men and women from different clans started a campaign of text messages and phone conversations. This led to physical movements and meetings on the tribal land and beyond, throughout 2012. In December 2012, the warring clans of the Yuri people met for the first time at Mingende Catholic Mission. The Catholic bishop, Anton Bal, was part of this meeting and inspired further conversations for peace and unity. The people hugged and cried. This was a defining moment for members of the warring clans. They worked hard to consolidate peace and unity.

In January 2013, the warring clans of Yuri publicly denounced war and pledged to sustain peace by performing the cordyline ritual mentioned above to remind them of their commitment to peacebuilding. Tradition dictates that anyone who breaches such a promise would be vulnerable on the battlefield; the curse would follow his clan for many generations. This leads Yuri men to avoid the temptation of war and to resolve matters peacefully.

Conclusion

Community peacebuilding initiatives are a solution to weak governance and law enforcement in dealing with all forms of violence. Peacebuilding embraces the fact that people are diverse and so are conflicts. The creation and maintenance of peace require varied approaches. It is important for community peacebuilders to be aware of and appreciate the different approaches to peacebuilding. This starts with understanding and appreciating one's own knowledge, social relationships and environment. It is this appreciation that provokes one to act for peace.

Author notes

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ISSN 2209-9557 (Print)
ISSN 2209-9549 (Online)